DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 334 831 FL 019 277

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TITLE Cognitive Clozing To Teach Them To Think.
PUB DATE 91
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the First Language International Conference (Elsinore, Denmark, 1991).
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adjectives; Adverbs; Class Activities; Classroom Techniques; *Cloze Procedure; *Form Classes (Languages); *Interpretive Skills; Language Patterns; *Language Processing; Nouns; Numbers; Oral Language; Prepositions; *Translation; Verbs; *Vocabulary Development; Written Language
IDENTIFIERS Names

ABSTRACT

A cloze-type procedure can be used effectively to teach interpreters how to anticipate what the speaker will say, inferring communicative intention. The exercise uses a text from which words are deleted, not randomly as in the true cloze procedure, but in significant locations or contexts. The words or groups of words suppressed are progressively more significant as the student gains skill. The first elements removed from the text are syntactic connectors, beginning with prepositions and markers of subordination. This is useful in overcoming prepositional awkwardness. Verbs and verb phrases are the next most easily guessed elements, followed by attributive adjectives and adverbs, verbs and nouns, proper names, and numbers. Substituting concepts for missing figures and names is also a useful exercise for learning to infer the speaker's intention. Clozing need not only be done in a bilingual task, but can be effective when practiced in a single language. The exercises can be done orally or in written form. In addition, students can be taught to cloze automatically by listening selectively and glossing over non-essential lexemes. Progressively more difficult cloze versions of a text on Antarctica illustrate the possibilities of this approach. (MSE)

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COGNITIVE CLOZING TO TEACH THEM TO THINK

by Sergio Viaggio
U.N.

In my first paper on interpretation,1/ I mentioned an exercise I had devised for my students. As it turned out, it had been invented well before my time under the name of clozing. Still, I think my version is a notch above it. Traditionally, clozing consists in the random or regular suppression of an element (a lexeme, as a rule) from the phonic chain the student is supposed to interpret. I suggest that randomness is not the best method. Not all elements in a given chain are equally relevant or inferable. What I have striven to do is suppress progressively more significant chunks, from a mere preposition to full syntagms and, yes, numbers and proper names. But let me start from the beginning.

One of the first things I teach my students (both translators and interpreters) is that words are not all that important when in context and situation. Indeed, when confronted with a lexical item they cannot understand or that somehow doesn't seem to fit, the very first tactic I advise them to try is plainly ignore it and see whether the utterance changes much without it, or, if a noticeable blank remains, what could plausibly fill it. As a rule, that sets them on the right track: more often than not, the missing link is close to the inferred one. If an educated guess proves impossible or too risky, the relevance of the unintelligible item becomes apparent and a dutiful search is thereupon commenced.

In simultaneous interpretation, of course, there is no room for such a search, but the tactic otherwise works quite well. How often do professional interpreters make out what they have not been able to hear? How many times, moreover, do they not stop to hear at all and just blithely second guess the speaker - i.e. anticipate? Anticipation can be both merely linguistic or, more importantly, cognitive, i.e. when the connection established by the interpreter between what he has been hearing and what he knows about the speaker, the subject matter, the specific situation, briefly - the world, allows him to infer the speakers communicative intention, his *vouloir dire*. Cognitive clozing helps develop such skills.

The first elements I do away with are syntactic connectors, first and foremost prepositions and markers of subordination. It works real stylistic wonders: One of the banes of beginners -and quite a few veterans- is prepositional awkwardness; most foreign prepositions wreak havoc among fledglings. The blessing of clozing syntactic markers is, precisely, that it eliminates the structural interference by the original. Sometimes the notional relationship must be reconstructed ('for' vs 'against'), although that is more frequently the case with subordination markers ('because' vs 'despite').

Another element that is easily guessed is the verb or verb phrase in periphrases such as '[to put forward] a proposal' or '[*alcanzar*] *una solución*,' which can be substituted by the

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corresponding verb: '**propose**,' '***solucionar***,' which, in turn, is one of the easiest ways of compressing.3/

The next step is that of attributive (as opposed to distinctive) adjectives and adverbs, by which I mean merely embellishing qualifiers: '[actively] participating,' '*una* [*importante*] *suma*.' They can normally be omitted as easily as they are guessed. Then come adjectives distinctive: 'A [complicated] proposal,' '*Actuar* [*antiéticamente*],' which cannot be guessed without resort to discourse analysis and the all-important speaker's *vouloir dire*. Later on, I also proceed to cloze attributive and distinctive syntagms and clauses: 'A [most [thought [provoking and [comprehensive]]]] report,' '*pisoteando* [*burdamente* [*y con* [*absoluto* [*descaro*]]] *los derechos del pueblo sudafricano*.'

Next come all manner of verbs and nouns, beginning with easily guessed fillers, as 'such action [contravenes] the 4th Geneva Convention,' '*nuestra delegación* [*apoya*] *la propuesta de Francia*,' to progressively less obvious cases: '*nuestra delegación apoya la propuesta de* [*Francia*],' 'such action contravenes the [4th Geneva Convention];' where the student must find a suitable noncommittal filler, for instance 'Our delegation supports one of the proposals,' '*tamaño proceder contraviene* ***principios fundamentales***,' or seamlessly skimp to 'our delegations supports the proposal to ...' or '*tamaño proceder* ***es intolerable***.'

Proper names are easy to guess if one knows whereof the speaker speaks: 'Soviet Secretary General [Gorbachov];' otherwise it is impossible: 'Argentine General [Lavalle].' The trick here consists in climbing up the generalisation ladder enough to leap over the hurdle: 'A certain Argentine general,' 'One of Argentina's national heroes' (provided the context furnishes such a clue). Ditto toponyms: 'The liberation of [Paris]' vs. 'The battle for [Karrandhar] in Afghanistan,' i.e. 'an important city,' 'a strategic city.' In such cases, the student is indeed asked to conceal his double ignorance, linguistic and encyclopaedic, but, more importantly, he must prove that he has understood and is capable of conveying the gist of the utterance, or, in the terminology of discourse analysis, the proposition.

The same applies to numbers. Students must be made to realise that, like words, not all numbers are equal, nor are all digits in a given figure. In the U.N., for instance, documents have numbers such as 'DP/1991/CRP.3/Add.2/Rev.1/Corr.1.' Now this is a loooong number! But how relevant is it and how relevant are its different elements? 'DP' stands for UNDP (United Nations Development Program), '1991' is the year, 'CRP' stands for 'conference room paper' (i.e. an informal document subject to negotiation), '3' is the number proper, 'Add.1' is an addition thereto, 'Rev.1' is a revised version of it, 'Corr. 1' is a *corrigendum* due to technical reasons. The U.N. interpreter is expected to know all this, as do of course all delegates. He knows, moreover, that at the 1991 UNDP Governing Council session each and every document is labelled 'DP;' 95% are as well '1991;' next must come either the number of the report, or the letter(s) indicating whether it is a draft

resolution, a draft report or an informal paper (respectively, R., L., or CRP); then come the numbers, which can go from '1' to '700;' and so on. As can be seen, in this case figures become more informative as they progress rightward, so much so that when the Chairman says 'We now shall take up document DP/1991/CRP.3/Add.2,' the interpreter can be heard uttering just 'Add.2,' it being understood that it is a DP/1991/CRP.3 opus.

Normally, though, figures become less informative as they progress to the left: $1,---,---.-- is 'more than a million dollars,' but how much is $-,233,125.19? The student must guess whether it is a 'substantive' or 'negligible' amount and come up with the concept behind the figure. Ditto in 'the problem was first raised -- years ago' or 'the report shall be ready no later than 19--.' Very seldom does a figure have intrinsic non-substitutable value. Even in a technical context, 'The atomic weight of hydrogen is of -, against that of lead, which is -,' can be safely negotiated by as 'The atomic weight of hydrogen is substantively lower than that of lead;' besides, if the audience are experts, they know the exact figures, anyhow.

Substituting concepts for missing figures and names is an extremely useful exercise that helps develop the students' ability constantly to analyse the speaker's *vouloir dire*, i. e. the sense he is trying to make. Awareness of such sense is the only foolproof guarantee against *contresens* or, more importantly, nonsense (an interpreter who makes a *contresens* may plead having misunderstood, whereas nonsense has no extenuating circumstances).

By the way, clozing need not be coupled to a bilingual task. I have not tried it for lack of time, but in a normal course I see no reason for it not to be practiced monolingually. After all it is not language manipulation that is being tested, but sense grasping. I will take as an example a text actually read (with a heavy accent and at quite a pace, to boot) by the Malaysian delegate at the 45th Session of the U.N. General Assembly in 1990. He is speaking about Antarctica. Now, why is Malaysia, of all countries, taking upwards of half an hour so minutely to go into the fauna, flora and climate of a realm so gelid and remote from her shores? Simple: Malaysia was at the time Chairman of the Group of 77, i.e. the developing countries (now much more than the original threescore and seventeen) - not to be confused with the non-aligned, whose membership overlaps but does not coincide. Except for a few developing countries, such as Argentina, Brazil, Chile and India, all members in the Antarctic Treaty are developed. In order to become Consultative Party to the Treaty, a country must carry on actual research and/or have a permanent base on the Continent. Observers are mere lookers on, with meager say and no vote. The speaker will be propounding the concept of 'Antarctica as common heritage of mankind,' meaning 'Antarctica for us too.' If the interpreter cannot grasp that, he'll never manage to do a decent job.

Notice that if knowledge of the above circumstances cannot realistically be taken for granted, knowledge about Antarctica

itself is a must for any mortal boasting a modicum of general culture.

Now that the reader knows enough about the story, I shall give progressively less and less clozed out versions of the initial substantive paragraphs and invite him to play Sherlock Holmes and reconstruct the murder from the clues. (The suspension marks stand for anything from a one-letter preposition to whole syntagms.)

> "Antarctica ... last ... wilderness. We ... work together preserve .... extreme climate ... isolation ... created ... wonderland ... significance, ... of purity ... rich ... for wildlife. ... percent ... world's ...-water ... in ... ice-cap, ... surrounding ... last ... blue whales .... largest wilderness ... planet, and ... fragile. ... Ecosystem has ... range ... levels and interrelationships. ... this ... give ... stability. However ... ecosystems ... few levels. ... impacts ... more ... effects. One ... species ... about half ... plankton. This ... feeds ... and birds. Reduction ... human ... any ... components ... ecosystem ... imbalance. ... not ... restored ... man or ... nature. ... feature ... ice sheet, accumulation ...,000 years. ... approximately ... percent ... average of ... 1,... meters ... contains ... percent of ... world's ice." (86 words)

A good guess would be, for instance:

> "Antarctica **is our** last **large** wilderness. We **must** work together **to** preserve **it**. **Its** extreme climate **and** isolation **have** created **a** wonderland **of enormous** significance, a **realm** of purity, rich **with** wildlife. **A vast** percent **of the** world's **fresh**-water **hides** in **its** ice-cap, **in its** surrounding **waters the** last blue whales **live**. **It is the** largest wilderness **in our** planet, and **it is** fragile. **Usually,** an ecosystem has **a** range **of** levels and interrelationships. This gives **it** stability. However **Antarctic** ecosystems **have** few levels. Impacts **on them have** more **consequential** effects. One species **represents** about half **the** plankton. This **plankton** feeds **all manner of animals** and birds. Reduction **by** human **intervention of** any **of the** components **in the** ecosystem **would cause an** imbalance, not **easily** restored **by** man or nature. **A unique** feature **of Antarctica is its** ice sheet, **a product of** accumulation **over thousands upon thousands of** years. **It covers almost all the continent with a deep layer that** contains **a huge** percentage **of the** world's ice." (170 words)

Our own speech is twice as long as what we used of the original. Since we do not know what exactly was left out, all we can reasonably be sure of is that a) we have said nothing that does not make utter sense, and b) we have said nothing that the delegate of Malaysia himself could not have said. Would that all interpreters could have that assurance every time! An interesting case is the turning of *'approximately - percent - average of - 1, -*

meters - contains - percent of - world's ice' into *'It covers almost all the continent with a deep layer that contains a huge percentage of the world's ice.'* Here, a very complex process of inferring the proposition and rendering it without the specific details is involved. It may prove, of course, well nigh impossible for students to do it on the go, but it is within their reach when the exercise is performed as sight translation and the teacher prompts them into finer and finer thinking. Also, as pointed out above, knowledge of the situation will lead them to understand that the speaker is not expounding on the fragile beauty of Antarctica out of mere poetic bent, but that he is laying the grounds for asserting that the responsibility for preserving such awesome realm is too momentous to be left in the hands of a wealthy few. It is in this light that all seemingly irrelevant lyricism is being taken by *'les uns et les autres,'* and in this light it is that it must be taken by the interpreter. Let us see how close we were. Here is a less skimpy version:

> "Antarctica ... our last continental wilderness. We all ... work ... to preserve .... Its extreme climate and isolation ... created ... wonderland ... global significance, ... bastion of purity ... rich haven for wildlife. Seventy percent ... world's fresh-water ... locked ... in its ... ice-cap, while in ... surrounding ... the last ... blue whales roam. Indeed ... largest wilderness ... of ... planet, and ... most fragile. ... Normally, an ecosystem ... wide range of levels and interrelationships. ... this variety ... depth ... give ... ecosystem stability. However, Antarctic ecosystems ... few levels despite ... interrelationships. ..., impacts ... more ... effects. ... single species ... krill ... comprise ... half ... plankton .... This biomass feeds seals, ... and birds. Reduction through human ... of any ... these components ... marine ecosystem can ... imbalance. Such ... not easily restored by man or ... nature. ... most ... feature ... Antarctica ... its ice sheet, formed ... accumulation ... snow ... 100,000 years. It covers approximately 98 percent, ... average ... 1,600 meters ... contains 90 percent ... world's ice." (134 words)

We can now safely assume that none of the elements somehow not restored is essential to sense, to the speaker's *vouloir dire*. Chances are most of the missing lexemes are but empty attributive adjectives, such as 'white' for 'snow.' Witness the following, almost complete version:

> "Antarctica ... our last continental wilderness. ... all have ... work together ... preserve .... Its extreme climate and isolation have created ... wonderland ... global significance, ... remarkable bastion ... purity ... rich haven for wildlife. Seventy percent ... world's fresh-water reserves ... locked in ... massive ice-cap, while ... surrounding oceans the last of the blue whales.... Indeed, ... is ... largest wilderness ...

> this planet, ... in many ways ... most fragile. ... Normally, an ecosystem has ... wide range ... levels and interrelationships. ... this variety ... depth ... give the ecosystem stability. However, Antarctic ecosystems ... very few levels despite considerable interrelationships. Consequently, impacts on these ecosystems ... more profound effects. One single species ... krill may comprise ... half ... plankton biomass. This biomass feeds seals, whales, fish and birds. Reduction through human exploitation of any ... components of ... marine ecosystem can cause ... imbalance. Such imbalance ... Antarctic is not easily restored by man or ... nature. ... most striking feature ... is ... ice sheet, formed ... accumulation ... snow over ... 100,000 years. It covers ... 98 percent of ... continent with an average of 1,600 meters and ... 90 percent ...world's ice." (163 words)

Do you still wonder what else may lay hidden behind the suspension marks? Okay, then, for the sake of completeness, here it is in all is unbounded glory:

> "Antarctica is our last continental wilderness. We all have to work together to preserve this. Its extreme climate and isolation have created a wonderland of global significance, a remarkable bastion of purity and rich haven for wildlife. Seventy percent of the world's fresh-water reserves is locked in its massive ice-cap, while in the surrounding oceans the last of the blue whales roam. Indeed Antarctica is the largest wilderness area of this planet, and in many ways the most fragile. .... Normally, an ecosystem has a wide range of levels and interrelationships. It is this variety and depth that give eh ecosystem stability. However, Antarctic ecosystems contain very few levels despite considerable interrelationships. Consequently, impacts on these ecosystems have more profound effects. One single species of krill may comprise about half the plankton biomass. This biomass feeds seals, whales, fish and birds. Reduction through human exploitation of any of these components of the marine ecosystem can cause an imbalance. Such imbalance in the Antarctic is not easily restored by man or by nature. The most striking feature of Antarctica is its ice sheet, formed by the accumulation of snow over the past 100,000 years. It covers approximately 98 percent of the continent with an average of 1,600 meters and contains 90 percent of the world's ice." (218 words)

Of course, the deeper the knowledge of Antarctica the interpreter has, the easier it becomes to supply the missing links. Also, the suspension marks do not give a clue as to the amount of syllables gulped, nor do we have the general intonation, which would have helped immensely. Still, I think the point could not be plainer: even the last but one version, where there were no crucial lexemes missing, has only about 75% the amount of words as

the original. Needless to say, initially, we would give our students much simpler exercises. But later on the approach can be reversed, as above, in order for them to see at what point they have acquired sufficient information to come up with an educated guess.

The exercises, moreover, can be done orally as well as in written form. A useful tactic is that of what, for want of a more plausible name, I call 'automatic clozing': Students must learn first to read and then to listen selectively. Instead of having someone else erasing non-essential elements for them, they must try and gloss over such lexemes automatically on their own. Of course, it is but the way we normally read and listen in real life to real utterances directed at us, although since our comprehension is not tested publicly right away, we do not really care if we miss a bit here or there. The translator/interpreter must indeed do a much finer job at reading and listening, as well as at writing and speaking. But the essential fact to bring home to the students is that the basic mechanism of comprehension and communication is the same in both cases: the audience are listening for a point, whilst the speaker is trying to convey a point. Once Malaysia's point has been basically grasped (and in this particular case, the interpreter at that meeting knows the point before the delegate even opens his mouth!), a few crucial linguistic elements in his discourse are more than enough to chart our course. The analogy I normally use is that of the pilot landing at night: yes, the landing strip has to be illumined, but the pilot does not need all those lights. Provided they are laid in the right direction and not too far apart, he will not crash if there are a few burnt out in between.

NOTES

1/ "Teaching Interpretation to Beginners, or How Not to Scare Them to Death," Proceedings of the 29th ATA Annual Conference, Learned Information, Inc., Medford, New Jersey, 1988, pp. 399-406.